

THE NARRATIVE OF CHAOS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE AFRICAN FICTION: TOWARDS THE DEMYSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE IN CHIMAMANDA N. ADICHIE'S "A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE"

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ABSTRACT

Post-independence African fiction portrays among other things the challenges of nation building set in motion by the African political leaders. One of these challenges centers round how to implement a long lasting peace among the many nation-ethnic groups living on the same geographic territory created by the colonizer. This research interrogated how, the third generation Nigerian writer, Chimamanda N. Adichie, presented violence in her Nigerian based short stories. The study demonstrated that the selected text, in its thematic pre-occupation and character demarcation, depicted how the clashes between Hausa Muslims and Igbo Christians resulted from a non-enlightened crowd and a less caring political leadership. Using the premises of postcolonial theory, this paper argued that despite her now and then stereotypical portrayal of the Hausa/Igbo binary opposition, Adichie had strived to call attention on the root-cause of Nigerian malaise which resulted mostly from cultural religious violence fuelled by political agendas. The study recommended that Nigerian and many other African nations' building efforts should start by leveling/smoothing the religious/cultural cleavage by showing that diversity should be an impetus for development rather than a source of mayhem.

KEYWORDS: Africa, Literature, Adichie, Violence & Religion

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on violence have mainly been carried out by sociologists, conflict study experts, and other social science related researchers. However, most of these studies reproduce stereotypes and are not done by those who are directly involved in the conflict. Sadly, most of the research work on violence is manipulated by Eurocentric hegemonic epistemology in which critics like Chabal and Jean-Pascal (1999) stereotypically support that disorder, chaos, and political confusion are normal to Africa. This type of Eurocentric claim is a continuation of those who view the continent as the 'heart of darkness,' the land of negatives where astonishing criminal and brutal acts can be undertaken. Vambe and Rwafa (2014) observe that "there is however in Africa, a refreshing look by young African intellectuals that refuse to minimize the complicity of Africans in their own historical misfortunes" (p.35). These young Africans who are affected directly by violence insightfully and authoritatively write on the topic and invite their audience to reflect on the roots and routes of African malaise and what is the way out for the mitigation of the problem. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie appears as one of these intellectuals and activists who are fed up with outsiders' misconception of a continent full of its own complexities and subjectivities.

Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, essayist, and feminist activist. She won some praiseworthy prizes such as MacArthur "genius grant;" as a fictional writer, she gains some fame for her realistic depiction and comment on

contemporary issues viz. socio-political corruption, religious and political conflicts, immigration and relationship, the struggles for better living conditions of Nigerian people and Africans at large. Her works of fiction mainly represent family life saga and religion as in *Purple Hibiscus*, the Biafran war of the late 1960's in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In her collection of short stories titled: *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie confidently reflects on Hausa-Igbo and Muslim-Christian violence together with cultism in her country Nigeria. She then audaciously comments on provocative themes such as mal-governance and political leadership failure under General Abacha's government (1993-1998) along with the root-cause of, and the rationale behind, African immigration and its consequences in *Americanah*.

Like many other postcolonial writers, Adichie does not have the luxury of "art for art's sake." Her exploration of the lives of postcolonial subjects serves as an impetus for understanding the African socio-political malaise. Despite her leaning feminism and her proclivity towards Biafran activism, the writer urges her audience to contemplate Nigerian socio-political unrest in *The Thing Around Your Neck* and more specifically religious violence in "A Private Experience."

Being one of the Nigerian based short stories compiled in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, "A Private Experience" follows two women (Chika and an anonymous Hausa Muslim woman) while they hide from a riot staged in Kano by an angry Muslim mob. Adichie portrays the coincidental encounter of these two women through the use of meticulous language and technique. She weaves her story by using the present when Chika is chatting and examining the woman's nipple and the future tense when the narrator relates what Chika will learn or do. This technique of mixing the present and the future tense is chosen by the writer to probably urge the reader to capture the expression of violence outside on the street as related by the omniscient narrator. At one point the narrative goes as follows: "later, Chika will learn that, as she and the woman are speaking, Hausa Muslims are hacking down Igbo Christians with machetes, clubbing them with stones" (p. 46). The story invites the reader to reflect on the historical, political, and religious conflicts between Igbo Christians and Hausa Muslims in Nigeria represented respectively by Chika and the market woman.

"A Private Experience" stresses an instance of religion based riots in Nigeria. Right at the beginning of the story, the reader meets the two main characters of the narrative struggling to find a place to hide from the human slaughter that is taking place on the Kano streets. The story is about one of the Nigerian burning preoccupations, interfaith and ethnic intolerance and violence; and how this problem can be alleviated. Nnolim (2012) cogently observes that "every generation of writers confronts the burning issues in its society and wrestles with them" (p. 159). Adichie fearlessly 'confronts' the issue of ethnic and religion based violence and 'wrestles with' it in her realistic handling of themes and characterization. This paper attempts to show how Adichie has used her short story as a tool to demystify the perceived Nigeria cultural/religious stubborn conflict through exposition while revealing the fact that the threat is real. Thus, there is a need to continue the sensitization work to mitigate misunderstanding that stems from religious intolerance. In this research work, an attempt has been made to reveal how the writer has audaciously strived to diagnose the ills of a society full of socio-cultural complexities and subjectivities and in need of perpetual reconciliation.

In a related development, the paper aims at responding to P. O. Iheakaram's rather loud lament in which he claims that "there is, at the moment, dearth of criticism of the Nigerian short story by Nigerians. The situation is fundamentally attributable to the non-recognition of the short story as a form worthy of serious attention in our educational system (p. 274). For Asoo (2012) the fact that short stories are sometimes neglected in favor of other genres is due "largely to the prominence the novel has enjoyed over and above other genres" (p. 14). And because "literature is a chronicler of society through which societal issues are analyzed with a view to making the society better" (Fashakin, 2015, p. 6), this research

aims at depicting how Adichie emphasizes the view that ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria is politicized and socially constructed, and its mitigation is indeed possible.

INTERSECTION OF ADICHIE'S "A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE" AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

In an attempt to shade light on postcolonial theory and criticism, the founding fathers (Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, GayatriSpivak, HomiBhabha) of this theory draw people's attention on the relations between the colonized and the colonizer. These relations, they contend, are unequal and littered with exploitation, misrepresentation, and hegemonic imposition (Said, 1978). For Jones and Manda (2006), "postcolonial theory traces back to imperialism deployment of binary logic both as an epistemological device and as an ontology, which posits a seminal dichotomy between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' conditions of being" (p. 198). For Soynika (1999), the impulse of postcolonial violence derives from pathologies of self-alienation and self-hatred, which carve out "... a featureless landscape of rubble, of a traumatized populace and roaming canines among unburied cadavers" (p. 12). This theory further interrogates the Eurocentric epistemological and hegemonic construct started earlier by people like John Lock or Hegel who portray Africa as a place of negatives, a place in need of salvation and a 'civilizing mission' (Adichie, 2009b).

However, postcolonial theorists urge critics to look at this theory from a functional angle. Indeed, McLeod (2000), in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, contends that postcolonial theory involves some activities like "reading texts produced by writers from countries with a history of colonialism (...), reading texts produced by those that have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism" (p. 33). This understanding, from an examination of what kind of activities are carried out in the writing of people 'with a history of colonialism,' informs the present research since it focuses on the fiction written by Adichie, a 'writer from' a country 'with a history of colonialism.' The chosen theory further helps to examine this writer's work of fiction in terms of its aesthetics, style, and thematic preoccupation. This study examines the theme of violence and the exposition of ethno-religious conflict as represented in Adichie's short story: "A Private Experience", and establishes the writer's contribution and concern in finding solution to issues that continue to bedevil the continent.

TECHNIQUES OF THE DEMYSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE IN "A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE"

Using Characterization to Depict and Demystify Violence

In "A Private Experience," the narrator names only four characters: Chika, Nnedi, the anonymous Hausa market woman, and her daughter, Halima. The whole narrative is woven around Chika and the market woman while they are caught in the conflict and trying to find a safe place to hide. Nnedi and Halima serve to balance the narrative. Nnedi and Chika are separated when they freak out and run for their lives. Similarly, the woman and her daughter lose each other's whereabouts during the turmoil. Each of the two main characters helplessly searches for their loved ones; Chika searches Nnedi while the woman looks for her daughter who was selling groundnuts. This makes them to be considered as the most important characters of the story and they represent the Nigerian religious and ethnic binary opposition which the writer twisted to make a friendly companionship; thus, asserting her optimism and hope for unity in diversity and a peaceful coexistence between culturally divided ethnic groups.

Chika

She is an Igbo Christian who happens to be in Kano when the riots occur while she is on vacation with her sister visiting their aunt. She reveals her occupation when she answers the woman's question, "where you go school" (p.49) by saying,

“We are at the University of Lagos. I am reading medicine. Nnedi is in political science” (ibid). Thus, Chika has the misfortune to be in a wrong place at a wrong time. Her attitude towards the Hausa woman serves a reflection on the root-cause of Christian–Muslim violence in Nigeria and the hope for a peace in a country torn by ethno-religious and political cleavages.

The Anonymous Hausa Market Woman

Unlike Chika, she does not have any formal education. This is made clear through her English as follows: “she is going safe place” when asking Chika where is Nnedi; or when she inquires “where you go school” in order to know the name of the school where Chika studies (p. 49). The woman represents many other ordinary Nigerian women who toil hard to cater for themselves. After listening to what Chika does as a medical student, she states, “I am a trader [...] I’m selling onions” (p. 51). As a mother of five, she has left her baby at home to come to the market to sell onions, a chore that she usually does to make some money for family expenses (pp. 53–54). The woman remains anonymous throughout the story, not because she represents the ‘nobodys’ of her society but because, as the narrator pinpoints, Adichie “does not want a conversation of naming names” (p. 52).

It follows then that the woman’s encounter with Chika, their conversations (sometimes full of intimacy), and their viewpoint regarding the riot represents the possibility of peaceful coexistence between the two different cultures and religions. Each of the two women worries about where to find their loved ones, probably killed in the skirmish. They share unforgettable time during their forced stay in the abandoned store to stay away from the riot and to save their lives because the angry mob is killing indistinguishably whoever happens to be in the market on that day.

Besides these two main characters, there are two minor characters, Halima and Nnedi. The reader never meets these two young women in the narrative. We only learn their relationship with the two main characters and what they are doing when the human slaughter starts. Just like Chika (a university student) and the woman (a petty trader), Nnedi is a university student reading political science while Halima follows her mother in their trading activities. This parallelism in characterization further stresses the difference between the two ethnic groups in terms of education and this representation tends to be biased and over generalizing by portraying the Hausa as a people in need of formal education or the education inherited from colonization. It is evident that the lack of formal education partly explains the root of the turmoil and points at the political responsibility of the Nigerian leaders who fail to provide quality education to many people in Northern Nigeria.

Setting in the Story

“A Private Experience” is set in a market in the far north and populous Nigerian town, Kano. The whole story presents the two main characters at one place, an abandoned store, where they find refuge from the riot. From their climbing in the store through the window until the end of the riot on the next morning, the reader learns about these two characters through direct dialogue and sometimes through the narrator’s comment on them. This choice of the setting helps the writer to strikingly represent ethno-religious conflict, especially by mentioning Kano alone, a city which mentioned, a discerned reader can easily recall the early 1980’s ‘Maitachina’ insurgency which also is tight to the current stubborn Boko Haram uprising. Thus, the setting of the story serves the writer to better expose the bad situation and leaves the reader to make their own choice as to which solution would be adopted to the conflict.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF VIOLENCE IN "A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE"

"A Private Experience," made a fearless commentary on the issue of violence, political leadership negligence, and an optimistic view on peaceful coexistence in a country struggling with ethno-religious complexities and cleavages. However, the leading theme circles round violence and how it can be mitigated. Scholars have strived to reflect on what fosters violence and what makes it thrive with an effort to recommend some solutions to it. African literary figures are not left behind in reflecting on the various arguments as to how violence can be tactfully tackled and efficiently quelled.

Though violence can occur in various forms (domestic, gender, religious/cultural, political...violence), all types of violence are life threatening and can easily jeopardize the well-being of individuals or the society as a whole. Social scientists have worked hard to examine the causes of conflicts and how to mitigate certain violent crises. Most often, conflict emerges when there are two groups in place vying for their ideology or interest to prevail, using violence as an option. For Anifowose(1989),

Violence has been used by groups seeking power, by groups holding power and by groups in the process of losing power. Violence has been pursued in the defence of order by the privilege, in the name of justice by the oppressed and in fear of displacement by the threatened. (p. 1)

Adichie's depiction of violence in "A Private Experience," is more about showing people that a less-enlightened crowd and a less caring political leadership pave the ground to let violence happen. Similarly, Adeyanju (1999) observes, "the power of art in transforming society lies in its potential by exposing a bad situation, the writer or artist suggests ideas that could correct such situations and leaves the final decision to the reader."

In "A Private Experience," Adichie's artistic power to transform her society lies in her attempt to expose 'a bad situation' (a representation of reckless killing of innocent people in Kano stress). For instance, when Chika runs in the street for her life, she is "not sure if the man running beside her was a friend or an enemy, not sure if she should stop and pick up the bewildered-looking children separated from their mothers in the rush, not even sure who was who or who was killing who" (p. 48). The massacre of innocent people is believed to be a "work of evil" (p. 51) by the less educated woman and possibly by many other ordinary fatalistic Nigerians. By representing how idleness plays an important role in Nigerian ethno-religious violence, the novelist questions the capacity of the political leadership in tackling the issue of unemployment. The turmoil started when idle men, who play draughts, call other Muslims to join in the killing of what they call the 'infidel;' and soon everybody is thrown in chaos. In doing so, the writer attempts to draw people's attention on conflicts that threaten her country and the humanity as a whole.

The escalation of violence and the thoughtless and brutal human slaughter seems to have stemmed from an unintentional act of driving over a copy of the Koran. As the narrator recalls, it had all started at the motor park, when a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. The men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market, asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book. (p. 48)

From these lines, it is clear that the killers are only waiting for a catalyst to go on carrying out their insane deed. The violent massacre results in many deaths and when the "sun is falling, and in the evening dimness Chika looks around ... sees the body ... the body must have been very recently burned" (p. 56). Later on Chika "...will see other bodies, many

burned... it will strike her that she cannot tell if the partially burned man is Igbo or Hausa” (pp. 56–57). Thus, the killing takes place without any discernment in a kind of ‘shooting in the dark’.

Though the incident seems to be coincidental with the expression “happened to be,” it suggests that there is an inexplicable tension between the two groups in presence. It is only later on that the writer through her narrator wishes that ordinary people, represented here by the anonymous woman, understand that “riots do not happen in a vacuum, that religion and ethnicity are politicized because the ruler is safe if the hungry ruled are killing one another” (p. 51). Thus, politics constitutes the rationale behind the slaying of innocent people. In many cases, politicians use ethnic and religious divide to serve their political agenda. Sadly, one would wonder, just like Chika, whether many people like the anonymous Hausa woman, with low or no education at all, have a mind “large enough to grasp” any of this politics (p. 51).

In addition, the carelessness of political leadership indirectly makes violence happen. When the government fails to create jobs, idleness thrives and the angry jobless people can easily turn the slightest and inadvertent mistake into a legitimate cause for mass killing. In the story, the narrator reveals that the men, who cut the Igbo man’s head off, are “men who sat around all day playing draughts” (p.48). Had these men had jobs, they might have not been sitting there all day playing and the killing of the Igbo man and the many other killings that followed might not have happened. What is more disheartening is that while the killing is taking place, “the government of General Abacha was using its foreign policy to legitimize itself in the eyes of other African countries” (p. 50). Adichie indirectly uses this assertion to attack Nigerian political leadership when the narrator reports Chika’s hope that her sister “Nnedi is safe somewhere” (ibid.) making this kind of political arguments, as she soothes herself with the thought that she will finally find her missing sister. But the reader finds nowhere in the narrative where Nnedi and Halima are found; they are likely killed in the riot which adds to the ruthless killing and cruel brutality in the midst of poverty.

Moreover, the media do not help to alleviate the situation in many cases and the writer urges her audience to realize that politics and media fuel the conflict between the two culturally divided groups. It strikes Chika to see how the massacre “has all been packaged and sanitized” when she listens “to BBC radio and hear the accounts of deaths and the riots – “religious with undertones of ethnic tension” the “voice will say” (p. 57). In many instances, the media, instead of looking at the conflict from a much more critical angle, they actually worsen the situation and fuel the conflict. They tend to think much more about the sensuousness of their account than telling the story with a tone that suggests the solution to the situation.

Furthermore, the writer questions the validity of claims made by many newspapers in their accounts. The narrator reports that “Chika will read in the Guardian that “the reactionary Hausa-speaking Muslims in the North have a history of violence against non-Muslims” (p. 58). The words used in this kind of reports can only worsen the situation. To cast doubt on the verisimilitude of this kind of media outlet, the narrative recalls that Chika “in the middle of her grief, ... will stop to remember that she examined the nipples and experienced the gentleness of a woman who is Hausa and Muslim” (ibid.). This experience reveals the degree of overgeneralization used by certain media to meet the need of their audience in search of farfetched stories, stories that do not represent the reality on the ground. Indeed, for Chika, the Hausa woman’s attitude contradicts the claims made by the media. In portraying the media in this way, Adichie invites her audience to critically look at what can be the root-cause of many conflicts in Africa and not to rely on the media account which can be sometimes biased and misleading. The example of the Hausa woman definitely shows an instance of compassion and gentleness.

Even though the portrayal of the anonymous Hausa woman casts a doubt on Adichie's castigation of "the Danger of a Single Story" (Alou, 2017), her use of violence shows how ordinary Nigerians represented by ordinary characters are actually willing to live in a peaceful coexistence. Right from the opening of the narrative, the reader realizes how the two characters are willing to help each other. When Chika reaches inside of the store, which "looks as if it was deserted long before the riots started" (p. 45), she wants to say thank you to the market woman (Hausa and Muslim) "for stopping her as she dashed past" (ibid.) and leading her into a much safer place since outside, on the street, the riot is on its way.

The market woman's action demonstrates how conflict can be mitigated in the midst of necessity. Through the friendship and bond between the two women, the reader learns how the two culturally different ethnic groups can actually live together cordially. Indeed, Chika and the Hausa woman help each other in many ways: As the story unfolds we meet the Hausa woman helping Chika to find a safe place, she stops Chika and tells her "no run that way" (p. 45) "Allah keep your sister and Halima in safe place" (p. 54); Chika medically examines the woman's aching nipple (pp. 52–53); the Hausa woman treats Chika's hurt leg as she observes: "your leg. There is blood" (p.57). She uses her scarf to clean Chika's bleeding leg and "she wets one end of her scarf at the tap and cleans the cut on Chika's leg, then ties the wet scarf around it, knotting it at the calf" (ibid.). When the riot is over and when the two women are ready to depart the store as the bleeding of Chika's leg has stopped, Chika wants to keep the scarf for souvenir of their stay in the empty store (p. 59). The scarf symbolizes an unbreakable bond and hope for better understanding between the two religiously and ethnically divided groups represented by Chika and the woman.

Additionally, the two women forced to stay in the abandoned store helps them to forge some sense of complementarity, friendship, and solidarity. The seemingly impossible friendship between Hausa Muslims and Igbo Christians is blurred with the forged relationship between Chika and the woman. Their friendship, which manifests itself through the sharing of their stories, fears, and misadventure, is contrapuntal to the reckless killing and an uncontrolled madness taking place outside on the street. Their friendship, during and after their refuge, undermines the anger of the Muslim mob and it underscores the socially constructed Hausa/Igbo ethnic cleavage. However, in so doing, Adichie ironically lends credence to notions of these characters complementarity which transcends their supposed and objective essential difference. In other words, the writer reveals that this difference fades in the face of common threat, that is, violence carried out by an angry mob. The market woman's fear points at the fact that violence can sometimes be like an uncontrolled bush fire which can consume everything on its way without any distinction. Through the short time relationship between Chika and the Hausa woman, the writer points at ordinary people's willingness to accept one another, or this might be Adichie's hope for peace.

CONCLUSIONS

Adichie's writings represent a strong call against violence, a comment on religious tolerance and the need for educating people on their religious affiliation to help them not to fall in the ditch of extremism. She has provided a fascinating fictitious account of violence and the striking evidence that violence does not happen in a vacuum. She has strived to convince her Nigerian compatriots and Africans at large to look critically at their societies' problems. One would assert that Adichie's thematic development on violence goes beyond Julien's (1995) observation that African literature is about "the reclaiming of voice and subjectivity and the critique of abusive power" (p. 296). Indeed, with time, African writers venture beyond 'the reclaiming of voice' to tackle contemporary issues germane to (gender violence, ethnic cleavages, life in the city, rural life and African beliefs, leadership failure, corruption, etc.).

Adichie's fiction can be read as a robust call for peaceful coexistence among African people, and a moral argument to persuade people to abandon ethno-religious and inexplicable tensions that continue to plague the continent. She uses the open end style to leave her audience meditative as nowhere in the story Chika and the Hausa woman have found respectively Nnedi and the girl. Singh (2018) observes that Adichie "showcases how creative writers can keep the audience from reaching a cathartic release by leaving conflicts unresolved. This style evocatively engage the readers and leaves them with discomfort that forces them to sympathize with the injustice Nigerians deal with" (<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Review-of-Chimamanda-Ngozi-Adichies-The-Thing-Around-Your-Neck>). It is no wonder that one can assert that she is a committed writer who is concerned with the plight of people in her country Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Her narrative has the artistic power and inspiration to expose the societal malaise and this is her contribution to transform her society by suggesting ideas which she believes are needed to change Africa. For her "African countries need to change and change occurs through ideas. Literature is an essential repository of ideas. Literature can lead to change, not by espousing crude propaganda but by creating a collective sense of who a people are (p. 96). Her assertion establishes *de facto* the place of literary texts in the search for solutions and paths for African socio-political and economic development.

However, without a strong political leadership and well-thought policies and decision making system, peace can only be a fanciful condition. As demonstrated in this study, literature can help expose societal discontent and the reader is left to continue to mull over why all this happens to Africa and what could be the solution. This paper recommends that similar studies be undertaken to better shade light on the problems that plague African texts like "Cell One," and other narratives on violence in African literature, which is outside the scope of the present research.

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